

Deborah, giving the old lady a hug. "And where is grandfather? I thought he would meet us at the door. He always does, and I've a Christmas present for him—money, grandmother, my own money!" And she playfully waved the two crisp five-pound notes before old Mrs. Menzies' face.

A wan smile broke over it.

"You are a good child, Deborah, and your grandfather is very proud of you. He was saying so this morning."

"Did he? Did he really? What an old darling! I must go and find him."

"He is in the library. He can't have heard you come in, or he's busy over his letters. The evening post has just come in."

Deborah flew across the hall and opened the library door very gently. She wanted to come in as a pleasant surprise to the old man. The room was but dimly lighted, a small fire smouldered in the grate, one candle in a silver candle-stick burnt low in its socket. It stood in the middle of the library table, by which old Mr. Menzies was seated, with his bowed head resting on his arms, which were folded across an open letter.

"Poor grandfather! He's tired and has fallen asleep," thought Deborah, advancing on tip-toe across the room.

"Grandfather," she whispered softly, "won't you wake up? It's I, Deborah, come to keep Christmas with you; and look, I've brought you a present." And she laid the notes by his elbow.

The old man did not stir, nor make any answer to her appeal. Deborah's heart stood still for an instant; she wondered if her grandfather had fainted, and with the quick impulse of affection, she bent down her soft warm cheek and laid it caressingly on the back of his bald head, and then she started away with an involuntary low cry of pain. Does anyone ever touch a dead object without knowing it? She stood there for a minute spell-bound, clasping her hands together, wondering what she ought to do. Then across the darkened room she saw the door opening slowly, and a terror seized her that her grandmother was coming to find her. Ah, she must not let her enter now. With steps as noiseless and quick as those with which she had entered she room she flew across it, and seizing her grandmother's hands, led her back into the hall.

"Wait, dear, wait," she said, assuming the protection of youth to age. "Grandfather, dear grandfather, is—"

There she paused. Her lips refused to form the word, but old Mrs. Menzies read it in the girl's scared white face.

"Not dead!" she cried, her voice rising to a feeble wail. "Not dead and alone and desolate. Ah, God help me!"

"He will! He will!" said Deborah, throwing her strong young arms about the frail form. "And grandfather was not alone, for God was with him. Mother," as Mrs. Menzies came back into the hall, "come, comfort poor grandmother. Grandfather is dead."

When, some hours later, old Mr. Menzies had been carried by loving

hands into his room, they discovered that the letter over which his arms had been folded was from Deborah's father—at least, half of it was from him—written in a highly hopeful strain. The claim that he and a friend of his had opened up in the gold-fields was turning out a very rich one. It was more than probable that it would make the fortunes of both, and Tom spoke hopefully of returning for good before another year was over, with money enough to set Boscombe Hall free and to re-establish the family fortunes. The letter broke off abruptly in the middle of a sentence, and was continued in the hand of a stranger, evidently a gentleman, a Mr. Rowden, who was Tom Menzies' co-worker. He told the sad tale of Tom's death as briefly and sympathetically as he could. It appeared that Tom had been overworked and considerably out of health, and the very day when he had left his home-letter unfinished he had gone out in the blazing sun for some cause or other, was seized with sun-stroke, and died a few hours after.

The news had been too much for his old father, and with the failure of his last hope his slender thread of life had snapped, and he had passed painlessly from this troublesome world to the peace which is eternal.

When the funeral was over and the three women had time to collect their senses, they sat in family conclave, considering their next step. Boscombe Hall came by the direct line of descent to Deborah, and she found herself in the bewildering position of heiress to a property that was mortgaged to the very hilt. She could not sell it until she was of age, which would not be for more than a year. Meanwhile, her grandmother proposed to go and live with her sister in Scotland, who had offered her a home for the present; and it was thought advisable to leave the Hall for the winter months under the charge of an old servant, and in the summer, if possible, to let it for whatever sum might be offered.

"And when I'm of age I shall sell," said Deborah, with quick decision, "and we will try to pay off our debts, and if there is anything left it must go to grandmother and you, mother."

"Dear child, what will become of you, thrown penniless upon the world?"

"Not penniless at all whilst I have health and strength left me," said Deborah, with a smile. "I can more than support myself now, and some day you may see my name big on advertisement boards as the great lady reciter! Who knows?"

"It is not fitting for a Menzies," said the old lady, still holding fast to the family traditions.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of in earning an honest living," Deborah asserted bluntly.

As Deborah and her mother drove back to the station on the day of their departure, Deborah looked back at the Hall with tears in her eyes. There was something pathetic in the fact that the old oak tree and its owner had broken down together.

CHAPTER XI.

DEBORAH and her mother went quietly back to London and to work, with only this great difference in their lives, that they had now no other home than their temporary lodging. They had neither of them undergone a very severe personal loss. Tom Menzies' wife had learned in the long years of separation from her husband to accept her fate with a sort of phlegmatic calm. In those early times at Boscombe Hall she had fretted greatly; her widowhood had begun then. To Deborah her father was merely a name, but she did mourn very sincerely the loss of her grandfather, the old man whose love she had won, almost against his will, and she rejoiced greatly in the thought that she had been able to comfort and brighten his declining years, but like the oak tree, he was very old. His fall had come sadly but not prematurely. Neither she nor her mother adopted heavy weeds of woe. They wore simple black dresses, but made no change in their manner of living. Deborah accepted all the engagements for reciting at parties in the coming season with gladness, and began to establish, not only a large circle of patrons, but also of friends. Amongst these latter the professor and his wife still held the foremost place. The tiny baby was a good-sized child now, and there were two other babies in the nursery. They were all equally dear to Deborah, and there was no recreation she so dearly loved as an hour's romp in the Norwoods' nursery. Little Mrs. Norwood looked almost as childish as ever, and Deborah used laughingly to declare that she believed that she was really the older of the two, for Deborah's early independence made her feel older than her years.

It had been no idle brag on her part when she had told her grandmother that she might live to acquire a modest fame, for when another year had passed the professor advised her to hire a public room and make her *début* as a public reciter. For some time Deborah refused, but she yielded at last. The venture was to be made in May, the height of the season. It was to be "Miss Deborah Menzies' Recital," and the only help she was to have was a professional singer who would enliven it by a few songs alternating with the recitations. It was a big venture, but the professor staked his reputation on its success.

It was three days before the event which was apparently to make or mar Deborah's future, when she came running up the stairs to their sitting-room with rapid steps.

"Mother," she cried, with a joyous thrill in her voice, "I don't know what my future may be, but my first night will be a success. I have just been to see my agent, and the room is full—scarcely a seat left. Haven't my friends been good?" And then Deborah, glancing into Mrs. Menzies' face, saw that something very unusual had occurred to shake her out of her wonted self-possession. Her lips were trembling and tears were rolling down her cheeks, and yet she was breaking into almost hysterical laughter.